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New Cloaks

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On September 23 the House of Representatives voted 354 to 56 to enact a piece of legislation that perilously abridges freedom of speech and of the press. On October 6 the Senate Judiciary Committee voted 17-0 in favor of a similar bill making final passage a certainty. What follows is the history of this extraordinary piece of legislation, purportedly designed to protect the identities of intelligence agents but perhaps marking a fatal turning point in the history of liberty in America.

The story begins with former Central Intelligence Agency officer Philip Agee. But although Agee's personal odyssey is by now all too familiar, the complex series of actions he initiated had repercussions far different from anything he intended—and repercussions that even today are little-known.

In London, on October 3, 1974, Agee, Notre Dame '56, made a public announcement more quixotic than most. He intended, he said, to wage unremitting private war against the Agency which had employed him for 11-1/2 years. According to Agee, who entered the CIA a rabid anti-Communist and who left it in 1968 a rabid pro-Communist, the CIA's unforgivable sin was its success in forestalling the worldwide triumph of revolutionary Marxism. Since that is just what the CIA claims, Agee's opinions disturbed nobody at the Langley, Virginia, headquarters of the largest, busiest, and most inept "intelligence service" in the world. What did infuriate the CIA was the strictly practical aspect of Agee's little war. In order to cripple the Agency, announced Agee, he intended to identify, and to train disciples to identify, "CIA officers and agents," and by doing so to "drive them out of the countries where they are operating."

A self-important sort of person (resembling in this respect the Agency he abhors), Agee did not divulge the CIA trade secret on which his prospective war depended—the almost comical truth that the identities of undercover CIA officers are not a secret, have never been a secret, and are not even meant to be a secret. These officers work at U.S. embassies under the thin guise of State Department employees and their "cover" is as trans-

parent as a plastic raincoat, beneath which they wear, metaphorically speaking, CIA T-shirts in order to make it easier for natives to find them.

In a foreign capital you can identify a CIA crew at the embassy by asking anyone at the bar favored by newsmen and politicians. The habitues can always give you the name of the CIA chief of station because he probably gives conferences—or even cocktail parties for that matter. Or you can ask an embassy janitor to point out the Americans who all work in the same room and only talk to each other. If you travel in diplomatic circles, you don't even have to ask who the CIA people at the embassy are, for, as one ex-CIA officer put it, "a favorite pastime of Foreign Service Officers and their wives was to point them out whenever the opportunity arose."

Even stay-at-homes can identify the CIA lads working under embassy cover with the help of various unclassified government publications. If you want to know how it's done, read "How to Spot a Spook" in the November 1974 issue of the eminently respectable *Washington Monthly*. One "indicator," as the CIA calls it, is the fact that no CIA official at an embassy is allowed to be listed as a foreign service office. This is because foreign service people, who have to take a stiff test to win that coveted title, refuse to let it be worn, unearned, by some ill-educated CIA clohopper. So much for America's famed clandestine service.

This great CIA trade secret would be something of a joke if the American people shared it. Most Americans do not, and because they do not, Congress, at this very moment, is exploiting that ignorance to carry out one of the deadliest assaults on First Amendment liberties ever attempted on Capitol Hill. The assault has been more than a year and a half in the making and the slow pace is readily understandable. Given a Constitution which states categorically that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging freedom of speech or of the press," passing such a law is not the work

embassies around the world. Congressional lethargy stemmed from many sources, but chiefly from the fact that we were still in the era of detente; that popular support for the Cold War had broken down, and that the CIA itself was in ill-repute. Thanks to Watergate's endlessly ramified revelations, the Agency, by 1975, had almost lost the only "cover" it has ever really cared about—the 30-year-long pretence that the Central Intelligence Agency is in fact an "intelligence-gathering" service. Blaring headlines about a CIA-backed coup in Chile and shocking stories about CIA attempts to assassinate foreign rulers gave the American people a tantalizing glimpse of the long-hidden truth. The chief activity of the CIA is to intervene politically in the internal affairs of half the countries in the world. The CIA is little more, in fact, than an enormous bureau of incessant meddling, working constantly to prop up pro-American governments, however inept or vile, and to subvert independent-minded rulers, however popular or worthy. It is chiefly because the CIA's embassy operatives are political manipulators, not spies, that their "cover" is of so little consequence.

All such "covert action," as it is called at Langley, is no secret to the Kremlin, which, interestingly enough, makes no effort to impede it. Indeed, it is no secret to anyone in the world except the American people, whose knowledge of what their government does overseas constitutes the only danger to "national security" America's rulers really fear.

The real CIA is a secret of state, and by mid-1979, the time was ripe for shoving this secret back in the box. The political atmosphere was changing. Detente and